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Portrait of John Eld, Esq., by Gainsborough

The Portrait of John Eld by Gainsborough

AMONG the paintings recently acquired for the Museum, the one which deserves first consideration on account of its great importance, although it is the most modern, is the portrait of John Eld, Esq., of Seighford Hall, Stafford, by Thomas Gainsborough.

John Eld was a liberal, philanthropic gentleman, born in 1704, who took an active interest in the foundation and administration of the Staffordshire General Infirmary, in 1766. We learn from an inscription on the painting "By the command and at the Expence of the Subscribers," that his fine example aroused an admiration which chose to express itself by ordering a full-length, life-size portrait of him from the most famous painter of the day. Judging from the apparent age of the sitter, and from the technique of the painting, the portrait must have been executed about 1772. John Eld is shown standing, leaning on a column, in front of trees, the leaves of which are beginning to assume their autumn colors. A certain desire for elegance is apparent in his costume; his powdered wig is carefully arranged; his red coat is trimmed with gold braid; lace edges his neck-cloth and his cuffs; he wears rings on his slender, white hands; seals hang at his waist; the gold hilt of his sword is delicately engraved. In order to mark his philanthropic action which furnished the occasion for this portrait, Gainsborough shows him holding with both hands a sketch of the façade of the hospital, raising his head proudly, and expressing in his countenance such gentleness and affability, such nobility of race and generosity of feeling, as lead us to conclude that John Eld must have been mourned by many friends when he died in 1796.

For nearly one hundred and forty years this portrait was kept in the Staffordshire General Infirmary, where it was forgotten until in 1910 it appeared at the Burlington House Exhibition. The following year it was shown in the British Fine Arts building at the International Exposition in Rome, but it was not catalogued by Sir Walter Armstrong in the admirable work on Thomas Gainsborough which he published in 1908. May 10, 1912, the picture was publicly sold in London for the benefit of the Staffordshire General Infirmary. It was acquired by a prominent dealer who very obligingly facilitated its acquisition by the Museum.

The Museum already possessed one painting by Gainsborough, which was described in the Bulletin for October, 1911, but it was stated then that that landscape represented but one side of Gainsborough's talent, and that the Museum should own a fine portrait by him, since it was as a portrait painter that he was especially esteemed and admired by his contemporaries, and that he is still most admired to-day. It was also desirable that the Museum should possess a typical English portrait, decorative in its treatment, representing a distinguished

personage against a background of trees and landscape.

The picture is remarkable for the freshness of its color and the excellence of its preservation; but the suppleness and skill of the execution are especially astonishing: that lightness and variety of touch are apparent, which aroused the jealousy, the admiration, and occasionally the ridicule, of Sir Joshua Reynolds, who was always more laborious and often more dull. Ruskin says, "Gainsborough's hand is as light as the sweep of a cloud, as swift as the flash of a sunbeam;" and the last and most distinguished historian of Gainsborough, Sir Walter Armstrong, speaking of his technique, says: "Gainsborough has been equaled only by Frans Hals, Rubens, Velasquez, Manet, and Sargent." Great as this praise may be, we believe that an examination of the portrait of John Eld will not belie it, for it dates from the best epoch in the career of the master, about two years after the "Blue Boy," belonging to the Duke of Westminster, and three years before the portrait of Mrs. Graham, the *chef-d'oeuvre*, perhaps, of the master, and the glory of the Edinburgh gallery. J. G.

Exhibition of Early Wood-Cuts



Cut from *Hyperotomachia*,
Venice, 1499

PPORTUNE recent accessions have enabled the Museum to arrange — for the first time — an exhibition of early German and Italian wood-cuts, with special reference to their use in book illustration and ornamentation. Incomplete though it is, as yet, the material now available comprises notable publications of the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, and reveals the great charm inherent in these printed pages of text and pictures. About 1490 we are not much more than a generation removed from the very beginning of book printing; at that time the publication of illustrated books was still regarded as a recent innovation, greatly scorned by the wealthy bibliophiles, one noted Italian humanist exclaiming that he would be ashamed to own a printed book. The printed, illustrated book was, in fact, the cheaper, democratic substitute of the manuscript, that noble, richly-bound volume of parchment leaves, with beautiful writing, enriched with gorgeous, illuminated initials, borders, scroll-work, rubrications, all the resources of the scribe, and further adorned, frequently, by the artistic creations, painted with infinite care by the miniaturist. One may readily appreciate the enormity of the task which confronted those pioneer-printers in vying with such excellence; one must realize also, how these very difficulties would spur them on to their utmost efforts, and this at a time when